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Seth Holmes, Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies: Migrant Farmworkers in the United States (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013)

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Reviewed by Rosalynn Vega (Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley)

In *Fresh Fruit, Broken Bodies*, Seth Holmes uses ethnographic detail to explain how social processes naturalize structural violence in the U.S./Mexico migrant labor system. In essence, the book serves as an “ethnographic witness” to how racism and the neoliberal global economy undergird the everyday suffering of Mexican migrants. Holmes’ book is the result of five years of ethnographic research among the Triqui people of Oaxaca, Mexico. During this time, Holmes lived with Triqui indigenous families in the mountains of Oaxaca, accompanied migrants during their illegal border crossing through the Arizona desert, and was jailed with his informants. In the United States, he planted and harvested corn, and picked strawberries alongside Triqui migrants. As a medical anthropologist and physician, Holmes observed patient-physician interactions in both Mexico and the U.S., thus providing new insights for improving health care delivery to the most vulnerable. Holmes is an engaged intellectual who frames his argument in human terms in order to transform public debate about health and migration.

Harking back to George Marcus (1998), Holmes outlines his “follow the people” multi-sited research method. He dedicates the book’s introduction to describing his strategy for gaining the confidence of the Triqui people. The introduction features his gritty, captivating ethnographic field notes, including a detailed description of his border crossing experience in March 2004. He identifies how migration studies often locate migration patterns within a framework of individualism and choice. Holmes, however, documents the structural factors that make migration anything but voluntary for his Triqui companions.

In Chapter Two, Holmes categorizes his work as an embodied anthropology of migration. In so doing, he makes the claim, “The Triqui migrants and I are fieldworkers” (30). His fieldnotes are produced through his total submission of mind, body, and social experiences to the practice of ethnographic research. In this chapter, Holmes delves deeper into the ethnographic method, tracing long-term embodied participation in everyday life back to Bronislaw Malinowski’s 1922 description. Importantly, Holmes engages with existing literature to explain how the body is an invaluable tool for anthropological investigation.

Holmes lived in a Triqui village in Oaxaca and alongside Triqui workers in a small shack on a farm in Washington state, thus using his body to inhabit the same spaces as his informants-turned-companions, even while his relative racial, socioeconomic, educational and citizenship-based privilege made him out of place. He gained legitimacy and respect from his informants by communicating to him that his research goal was to “experience how the poor suffer.” Instead of giving the impression that he is an uninvolved anthropologist, this chapter is deeply self-reflexive, and outlines how his fieldwork experience has left its mark on his psyche. Holmes admittedly cannot escape from his own privilege—a theme that recurs throughout the book and is demonstrated by this brief exchange with an indigenous friend: “I explained to him that I did not want a luxury house, but rather a simple little house. Samuel replied, looking me in the eyes, ‘But you will have a bathroom on the inside, right?’” (80)

Holmes’ inescapable privilege when attempting to perform embodied anthropology has been a point of critique. In the book, Holmes admits the guilt he felt when he soaked his aching muscles in a gym Jacuzzi after failing to even pick the minimum required amount at the farm. Holmes’ decision to cross the border with his informants can be called into question, since, once caught, he inevitably benefited from the privilege of American citizenship, spending just one

night in a private cell before being released. Also, chauffeuring a group of Mexican migrants from Washington to California is also vulnerable to critique since here Holmes leveraged his whiteness, which is less likely to draw suspicion from police officers when driving a new car. The question here is which is more ethical: to attempt to conduct embodied ethnography despite the inescapable nature of privilege among PhD-trained anthropologists in an effort to shed light on the harsh realities lived by informants, or to refrain from using this approach for gaining insight on issues of human importance due to its vulnerability to criticism. The best solution to this conundrum is for the reader to decide.

Chapter Three outlines in detail the ethnic hierarchies that lead to segregation on U.S. farms. The Skagit Valley is a site where multiple transnational circuits of Mexican migrants converge, including Holmes' Triqui informants from Oaxaca. Holmes was permitted by Japanese-American farm owners to work on the farm, thus gaining an insider's perspective on realities that are hidden from public view. In this setting, Holmes observed "conjugated oppression in action." This concept, first coined by Philippe Bourgois, emphasizes how ethnicity and class operate in conjunction to produce oppression that is materially and experientially different than that produced by either operating alone (Bourgois, 1988). Holmes noted how power in U.S. agriculture follows hierarchies defined by class, race, and citizenship. Furthermore, the inequalities on the farm are both produced by and reproduce inequalities in society at large. Holmes points out that everyone working at the farm, ranging from farm executives to contract laborers paid by the hour, is structurally vulnerable in a neoliberal economy; however, the depth of one's vulnerability depends on their position within the labor structure.

Symbolic verbal metaphors (using words like people “above” and “below,” those “overseeing” and those “at the bottom”) also corresponds to hiddenness and visibility. This hierarchy begins with whites and Asian-Americans at the top, followed by Latino U.S. residents and citizens, undocumented Mestizo Mexicans, and undocumented indigenous migrants. The ethnic subordination of indigenous individuals is bolstered by continued notions that indigenous people are less “civilized,” thus naturalizing their being “closer to the ground” while working. In this continuation of the symbolic verbal metaphor, physical position (body posture while working) maps onto social position in the farm hierarchy. Those at the very bottom are the least visible to society, which Holmes asserts, enables “collective bad faith” and exploitation of these individuals.

Farm workers bear a disproportionate share of sickness, which extends to a fatality rate five times greater than that of all workers. In Chapter Four, Holmes discusses how the violence continuum is embodied through illness and suffering (not just personal sickness, but also mental, existential, and interpersonal anguish). In using the term “violence continuum,” Holmes is referring to Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois’ understanding of violence as a continuum, which includes not only direct political violence, but also structural, symbolic, and everyday violence (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2003). From Holmes’ perspective, “how the poor suffer” is a direct embodiment of multiple types of violence along the violence continuum. Triqui migrant laborers experienced political violence and land wars in their places of origin. They experience structural violence through neoliberal pressures which force them to cross the dangerous border terrains illegally. This structural violence follows them to the farms at which they eventually work the “lowest” jobs. These physically demanding positions cause them to endure disproportionate amounts of injury and sickness.

In Chapter Five, Holmes combines illness narratives and interviews with clinicians in order to diagnose what is wrong with the doctor-patient relationship. Holmes takes Arthur Kleinman's illness narratives and Paul Farmer's structural violence and turns these two concepts on their head when he focuses on the explanatory models and social and economic vulnerabilities of providers instead of just patients (Kleinman, 1988; Farmer, 1997). By venturing to understand the lens through which providers view their patients, and the limits they face within bureaucratic structures, Holmes is able to explore the contours of the care providers can ultimately offer. He found that physicians often value their explanatory models, rooted in biomedical expertise, over that of their patients, which is based on embodied knowledge. Furthermore, physicians may inadvertently blame migrants for their health problems by focusing on culture and behavior and ignoring social structures. Holmes is critical of acontextual medicine, including behavioral health frameworks that can lapse into blaming the victim when they focus on the patients' habits and ignore global political and economic structures, and acritical cultural competency. Instead, he suggests that physicians be trained in "structural competency."

Chapter Six ties together the themes of the former chapters. The living and working conditions of migrant laborers are hidden from the public eye, and assumptions about deservingness justifies the different jobs and housing that different people deserve. Migrant laborers are described as "closer to the ground," which stealthily serves to exclude them from "Americanness." Migrant laborers are blamed not only for their own suffering, but also for the suffering of Americans. Due to what are perceived to be natural, ethnic, bodily characteristics of indigenous people, the Triqui are understood to be deserving of their social position, thus naturalizing their oppression.

His conclusion chapter is a call to arms. Holmes asserts that by seeing hierarchies as socially constructed and therefore malleable, meaningful change can occur. Change would require rescripting the very terms with which the American public refers to migrants - the term “illegal aliens” is inherently Othering and dehumanizing. He argues that ethnography is a tool available to social scientists for revealing the material and discursive social processes leading to inequality and the suffering of migrant laborers. His book is a call for solidarity from around the globe.

This book is relevant for both introductory and advanced students of cultural and medical anthropology; ethnic studies; and studies in immigration, labor, food, and agriculture. It is a gripping example of “public anthropology,” and is therefore written in accessible prose for readers among the general public interested in the health and well-being of migrants who pick fresh produce while often not being able to afford to feed themselves. It can furthermore serve as a guide for physicians striving to practice liberation medicine - that is, treating social causes in addition to biological causes through engagement with the poor - and public health professionals hoping to create a critical public health for the betterment of all. This valuable piece of scholarship offers insight for immigration and food policy.

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